



University of Tabriz-Iran
Journal of *Philosophical Investigations*
ISSN (print): 2251-7960/ ISSN (online): 2423-4419
Vol. 13/ Issue. 28/ fall 2019
Journal Homepage: www.philosophy.Tabrizu.ac.ir

The Absence of Self: An Existential Phenomenological View of the Anatman Experience*



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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Anatman experience as described by Guatma (6th century BCE). Many Buddhist philosophers consider the absence of self as a foundational experience of Buddhism. This paper elaborates the Buddhist Absence of Self from the View of Existential Phenomenology. The paper articulates the phenomenological difference between the Ontic-Ontological absence of Self in early Buddhism and the Ontic-Ontological presence of Self in Contemporary Existential Phenomenology. Throughout the paper there is an Existential Phenomenological focus on the intertwining of our Sense of Self and our Sense of Being. The sense of self in early Buddhism is being-less, baseless and empty. Empty of What? Empty of Being! There is no presence of Being and no Being of presence. There is no experience of Being. There is no source of Being. There is no source of Being for our mind. The mind is absent of Being. There is no source of Being for us as person. In early Buddhism the absence of self is the absence of Being-ness.

Key Words: Anatman, Absence of Self, Presence of Self, Ontic-Ontological Absence, Ontic-Ontological Presence, Absence of Being, Presence of Being

The Anatman experience was first articulated by the mythical Gautama (6th century BCE). Throughout the unfolding history of Buddhism, many Buddhist philosophers consider the absence of self as a foundational experience of Buddhism. Of course, there are many forms of Buddhism. Nonetheless, the Anatman experience is a basic assumption within Indian Buddhism. (Karundas, 2018).

The Personal Phenomenological Experience of the Sense of Absence of Self

Of course, the profound experience of the sense of the absence of self does not belong to Buddhism alone. The experience of the sense of the absence of self is deeply built into the tragic aspects of our human existence and our human world. The experience of the profound sense of the absence of self is open to everyone and at some time does touch everyone.

The sense of absence of the experience of self is often presented within philosophical and psychological traditions as a mind alone experience within which there is a psychological sequence of experience. Various traditions express the understanding that the experiential sense of self may appear and disappear depending on situational events and the developmental history of the person.

In these ontic traditions the self is considered as part of the mind structure, like a self-concept, or self-image structure or the locus of the experience of psychological identity. The structure of self is considered by many psychological traditions as the source of self-agency in the world. How can we have self-agency without being a self? Without the actuality of self, self-agency is considered an illusion.

Ontic-Ontological Traditions

In the ontic-ontological traditions the sense of who-ness, and the sense of person reflects an ontic-ontological basis of being human. Being human reflects both a psychological dimension and an ontological dimension of existence.

Absence of Self is Absence of Being: An Existential Phenomenological View of Early Buddhism

The absence of self in early Buddhism is the experience of psychological phenomena without the base of Being and without the medium of Being. The self is equated with the mind and the functions of the mind alone. In early Buddhism the mind is a sequence of mental functions and is a functional mental phenomena. The functions of mind in early Buddhism are both Being-less and Baseless. The sense of mind as well as the sense of self in early Buddhism is a Being-less and Baseless phenomena. In early Buddhism our sense of self is considered an illusionary experience, and our experience of our mind functions is Baseless and Being-less. There is no medium of Being and no base of Being in early Buddhism. There is no ontology in early Buddhism. So what remains? Nothing remains!

The sense of self in early Buddhism is being-less, baseless and empty. Empty of what? Empty of Being! There is no presence of Being and no Beingness of Presence. There is no experience of Being. There is no source of Being.

There is no source of Being for our mind. The mind is absent of Being. There is no source of Being for us as person. In early Buddhism the absence of self is the absence of Being-ness.

The profound sense of absence of self reflects the profound sense of absence of Being both as source and as the very sense of the actuality of experience that Being brings. The sense of absence of self reflects the absence of a Being-full self- experience. For early Buddhism the sense of self is an illusionary experience. In early Buddhism a person can never find their self and neither can the person find their sense of Being. Early Buddhism expects the self to be a form, a kind of thing.

Brentano “The Phenomenologist”

As one of the fathers’ of phenomenology the philosopher psychologist Brentano taught in 19th century Vienna. Brentano taught students such as Freud and Husserl about psyche. Brentano taught that the experience of self reflects the psyche dimension of human experience. The self does not have form. The self is not a thing. The self is not a form. Our self is formless. Our self is an innermost experience. Our self is a phenomenological experience. The self is the inner experience of our knowingness as who-ness, and as Being-ness. Being can manifest forms and yet Being itself is formless. The sense of our self is our sense of our formless inner Being-ness within us. Our formless sense of self is embodied within our own human form. Early Buddhism did not know that the sense of self is formless and that the mind only knows form. The mind alone cannot experience self. The mind alone cannot experience Being. The mind alone experiences forms.

Mind Can Not Find Self

The sense of self is formless presence. The sense of self is the Being-ness of our own Being. Our mind cannot find the self. Our mind only knows forms. Our mind cannot see the self, as our self has no form. Our mind can think about the self, but our mind cannot experience our self. Our self is the Being of our being. We can experience our self through our awareness and we can experience our Being-ness as our self within our awareness. We can experience the presence of our self which is the radiance of our Being within us. We can experience our self within and through our awareness. Our awareness experiences and knows Being. Our mind only knows form.

The self is without form. Our self is formless. Our sense of our Being is formless. Our mind cannot experience formlessness. Our mind cannot experience Being-ness. Our mind cannot experience our self. Because the mind cannot experience self, does not mean that the self does not exist! Some Buddhists, (in fact many Buddhists) think because our mind cannot experience self, and cannot experience formlessness or Being-full-ness, they then conclude the self does not exist. This is not true nature of self. Phenomenology helps us understand that just because our mind cannot see or experience our formless self, does not mean that our self does not exist. Our self is our lived experience of embodied Being. Our self is known through the knowing of our awareness and not mind alone. Our self is not a form.

The sense of the absence of self reflects the profound absence of Being-full existence. During the early Buddhist period the Absence of Being and the Emptiness of Being was understood to completely permeate human experience. Absence permeated the sense of person. Absence permeated the sense of the embodiment as person. This absence of Being permeated the sense of otherness, and permeated the sense of the world. The sense of absence permeated all phenomena. The sense of absence permeated the mind and the body. The only reality was absence. The experience of absence is suffering. (Lopez, 2012).

Being-less-ness

In early Buddhism our sense of self was considered illusionary. Beyond our illusionary sense of mind there was only absolute nothingness. This nothingness is Being-less-ness. This nothingness is lack, the lack of Being. This nothingness is the emptiness of cosmological source. This emptiness of early Buddhism is the Being-less-ness of existence. This emptiness is the emptiness of the Being-less-ness of phenomena. This emptiness is the emptiness of the phenomena of Being. All phenomena is Being-less. All phenomena is empty of Being. The experience of phenomena is emptiness, nothingness, absence, lack. This emptiness is suffering.

This lack is not the void-ness of potential space. This lack is not the void of the Dharmakaya, the openness of pure potential space. This lack is an infinite abyss of lack. This dreary experience is schizoid. The word schizoid implies Being-less-ness and selflessness. There is no presence of Being and there is *presencing* of Being-ness. In early Buddhism all phenomena is Being-less and selfless. There is no presence or *presencing* of Being. There is no ontological base or ontological source of human Being-ness.

Absence of the Being of Phenomena and the Phenomena of Being

This sense of pervasive absence of the self of phenomena reflects the pervasive absence of the Being of phenomena. There is no Being of phenomena and there is no phenomena of Being. In the early Buddhist tradition to use Heideggerian language the experience of the absence of the sense of self is an absence both on the ontic level of experience as well as the ontological dimension of experience.

This early Buddhist view of human existence is profoundly fragmented, nihilistic and solipsistic - ally painful. Within this Being-less, baseless and selfless view, life and human experience is considered to be illusionary and deluded. Life is suffering and the only goal is cessation. Cessation means "let me out of here".

Ontic and Ontological Absence of Self

In early Buddhism the absence of self is an ontological absence. In early Buddhism there is the lack of the ontological actuality of our sense of self and the lack of the ontological actuality of our sense of the world. There is no ontological support for self-experience and self-presence. There is no ontological basis for our human experience of the world. There is only absence. There is no Being of meaning and no meaning of Being. There is only absence!

Human existence is the pervasive vacuous-ness of absence. The transcendental path that arose during early Buddhism was the path of going beyond, and going beyond and going beyond the absence of Being.

The Transcendental Experience

The transcendental experience is beyond mind, beyond world, beyond all phenomena. Beyond both inner most phenomena and external phenomena. The transcendental path began as a way of going beyond Being-less phenomena. As the Buddha said GO Beyond, GO Beyond, and GO Beyond. Yes, Go beyond all phenomena, Go beyond our mind phenomena, Go beyond the world phenomena. Go beyond body phenomena. Go beyond relational life phenomena, go beyond love. Go beyond desire. The transcendental path is the path of going beyond everything and everyone. The transcendental path is solipsistic.

The Existential Phenomenological View of Self: The Actuality of Being, The Actuality of Self, the Actuality of Existence!

I will now focus on the existential phenomenological view of self and Being. Actually, the reality of our sense of our self is ontologically actual. In existential phenomenology the reality of our sense of self is an ontological actuality. The sense of the world is ontologically actual. The sense of others is ontological actual. The sense of love is ontologically actual. The sense of desire is ontologically actual. The sense of our self and the sense of our Being are co-emergent and convergent. The sense of our self and the sense of our Being are indivisible. This is our amazing and wonderful and beatific experience of human beingness, human selfness and human personhood. Human presence is the *presencing* of Being. Human presence is the presence of Being. The world itself is the *presencing* of Being. The world is both ontic and ontological. You and I are both ontic and ontological. (Capobianco, 2014).

Indivisbleness of Sense of Self and Sense of Being

In existential phenomenology the sense of our self and the sense of our Being are indivisible. The sense of our own self is our sense of our own Being-ness. This experience of our ongoing continuity of our own Being-ness is our “mine-ness” of self-presence. Self *presencing* is the presence of my Being as myself.

The sense of my own Being is my own sense of self. The sense of self is not a thing. My sense of self is not an illusionary void-ness. The sense of our ongoing continuity of self is our experience of our ongoing continuity of Being. Our self is the experience of the singularity of our Being which is Being itself as us. This is the meaning of the sense of our personal singular ontological sense of self. Moreover, we can experience an ontological sense of self within ourselves, and we can experience an ontological sense of self within another person. Life is an ontological actuality. Love is an ontological actuality. Family is an ontological actuality. The Being of world is an ontological actuality.

Awareness of Self

The sense of our self is known directly through our awareness. Our awareness knows Being and our awareness knows self. Our mind knows form

and our mind knows things. Our mind cannot know Being directly and yet our mind can think reflectively about our self. But our mind cannot directly experience self. Our mind can think reflectively about Being and yet our mind cannot know Being directly. Our mind can know the form of a Being but not Being itself. When our mind is in union within our awareness, then we can as the one knower know the form of our Being and the Being of our form. We can know the form of the Being of the world and the Being of the form of the world. We can know the form of the Being of our beloved and we can know the Being of the form of our beloved.

Can You Find Your Self with Your Mind Alone? “No, I cannot!”

When Buddhists attempt to know the self through their mind alone, they will never ever find the self. Consequently, they think that the self does not exist. Buddhist in mind alone cannot experience self. Early Buddhism foreclosed the knowingness of awareness. Early Buddhism only had confidence in the rational knowledge of the mind. The source of knowing in early Buddhism was the mind alone. The mind of thinking, feeling, sensation and memory. The knowing of awareness was foreclosed. There was no access to the immediacy of our awareness field.

Our self is formless, our self is our Being. Our self is no-thingness. Our self is not a thing. Many times the Tibetan Lama will ask the student can you find your self with your mind? Of course, you cannot find yourself with your mind. Your mind only knows form. Your self is formless and your self is your Being. Our self is our felt sense of presence. Our mind can think about the self, and our mind can imagine our self. Our self is an ongoing experience, our self is not a thought. Our self is the felt sense of the radiance of our Being. We can experience Being through the doorway of awareness.

The early Buddhists were located in their mind alone. There was no access into awareness and to the direct knowing of self, the direct knowing of Being. Our self is an experience and not a thought. Our self is our experience of our ongoing continuity of embodied Being. Because our mind cannot see our self, because our mind does not directly experience self, does not mean the self does not exist, as some Buddhists think. Our self is formless. Our self is not seeable as a form or as a thing. Our self is our sense of our own Being. Our sense of self is an actual formless experience of presence. Our sense of self is not deluded or an illusion.

The Knowingness of Who-ness: the Openness of Being

We can have a valid sense of who-ness within our self as our self and a sense of who-ness within another person as their self. Intimate life is the actuality of the openness of Being. Within the duality of our being we can experience the non-duality of Being itself. Within the non-duality of Being we can experience the duality of beings. This is the intersubjective experience of the non-duality of Being within the duality of human beings. Within the intersubjective experience within the duality of human beings, there is the experience of the non-duality of Being. This of course happens whenever there is true love. The non-duality of Being is the indivisible oneness within the duality of the two different beings. As the Dakini said to Dudjom Lingpa, “You and I are indivisible”.

Through the appearing of a being, we can experience the appearing of Being itself. Through the appearing of a human being whom we love we can experience the appearing of Being though and as the human being we love. We can live within the world of beings as the field of Being. As the Shaivite Masters declare, “The Bliss of Samadhi is the Bliss of the World”.

We can experience Being by entering into our own Being. Within our being, Being appears as Being. We can experience Being by entering into the Being of another being, and experience the Being of that being. The Being of a being is Being itself. That is amazing and so simple, so pure! This is the Beatific-ness of human existence.

Who-ness as Awareness, Who-ness as Self

The sense of our who-ness is our sense of our awareness as our Being. Our awareness is the knowingness of our Being. Our awareness knows Being and our Being knows awareness. The knowing of Being is the knowingness of awareness. This knowing of Being as the knowing of awareness is our experience of self. Our self is our awareness. Our awareness is the knowing not of mind but of our Being. Our Being knows Being. This is the Beatific-ness of human experience. Early Buddhism foreclosed this awareness and the corresponding sense of Being and self. Early Buddhism was stuck in the mind alone.

Our mind knows form and our own awareness knows Being. Most specifically our awareness knows our own Being. Our mind knows our form and our awareness actually knows our own Being. This openness of Being is the openness of our own awareness. Our awareness is our knowing of Being. The knowing of Being is our awareness. The knowing of mind and the knowing of awareness in union is the one knower knowing self, knowing the field of beings as the field of selves. Early Buddhism was located in mind alone.

We have two modes of knowing. These two modes of knowing are most important in understanding the sense of absence of self and the authentic sense of presence of self. Our self is not a thing. Our knowing of our own self as our form of Being reflect the union of our mind and our awareness within us as the One Knower. The union of mind and awareness allows us to experience the non- duality of Being within the duality of beings. This is the beatific experience. This is the Bliss of the Ordinary.

Actuality of Being rather Than Absence of Being!

There is a profound and vast difference between the early Buddhist sense of absence of the ontological sense of self and the existential phenomenological actuality of our sense of Being as our self. Our sense of self as our Being is the actuality of the natural experience of Being in existential phenomenology. Being is our nature. Being is the nature of all beings. There is only one nature. Being is the nature of all the forms of Being. The nature of Being is the nature of everything and everyone. This is *Una Voce*!

Although I am using the language of existential phenomenology to describe this experience of our own self as Being, this natural experience is elaborated in many traditions and many cultures. Including the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of

Dzogchen and the Hindu tradition of Kashmir Shavism, the Sufi tradition of Ibn Arabi, and the many forms of the early Christian Gnostic traditions.

The existential theologian Paul Tillich is a contemporary theologian who describes our self as the natural experience of ongoing continuity of luminous Being. Karl Rahner was the Catholic existential theologian who described our personal Being as the manifestation of Being itself. The experience of self and the experience of Being converge in many forms of existential theology, existential psychology and existential philosophy.

The Difference Between Early Buddhism and Existential Phenomenology

The difference between existential phenomenology and early Buddhism is this! In early Buddhism there is no ontological sense of self and there is no ontological source of self. There is no ontological basis or ontological ground of self and there is no ground of Being. There is no ontological ground of whoness, and there is no ongoing ontological continuity of Being as our self. In early Buddhism there is no ontological source of the world or ontological source of the Being of the world.

In early Buddhism there is only the knowing of the mind. In early Buddhism there is only the conceptual knowing of mind. There is no knowing of awareness. There is no Being of person and no Being of the world. There is no Being in early Buddhism. Early Buddhism is without Being. In early Buddhism there is no Being of phenomena and there is no phenomena of Being. There is no Being of meaning and no meaning of Being. What remains? Absence!

In Early Buddhism Absence is the Only Reality

The absence of the sense of self is the absence of the sense of the Being-ness of our own Being. There is no Being of self and there is no Being of phenomena. There is no phenomena of Being. Phenomena is Being-less. Phenomena is meaningless. This is the emptiness of non Being. This is the emptiness of absence of self. This void-ness reflect the absence of the experience of Being. There is no Being of meaning and no meaning of Being. This is suffering.

The Conflictual Experience of Being and The Absence of Being

The experience of Being and the Absence of Being is a conflictual experience in the unfolding historical narrative of Buddhism. In time and through time, and over time eventually, there is within Buddhism the experience of Being self- manifesting as beings. This experience of self- manifestation is explicitly experienced within the Vajrayana traditions of Dzogchen beginning in the 8th century in Tibet. Of course, there are Buddhist who think Dzogchen is not truly Buddhism.

This intensely conflictual Experience of Being and the Experience of Absence of Being unfolds throughout the history of Buddhism and throughout the many different cultural expressions of Buddhism. The drama of existence and non- existence is a foundational conflict within Buddhism. This drama of existence and non-existence is the drama of Being and absence of Being. This

drama is fundamental to human beings. Sometimes this great existential conflict is expressed as the human instinctual dynamic of Eros and Thanatos.

There is the ongoing conflictual experience of the actuality of the existence of phenomena and the illusionary existence of phenomena. To say this in another way, there is this intrinsic philosophical ambivalence about the appearance of beings and the experience of Being. There is ambivalence about the existence of the world. There is continuous ambivalence about our human experience of embodied sense of self and the embodied sense of others. This ambivalence reflects the primitive splitting of our experience of all phenomena into extremes of dissociative existence. This unhappy ambivalence reflects the foundational Buddhist praxis of Dissociation and Detachment from human experience and the actuality of human experience. The foundational Four seals and Noble truths of Buddhism reflect this relentless suffering of ambivalence about our experience of reality and the profound absence of the sense of actuality of our existence. Being-less reality is suffering. Being-less reality is a dissociative delusion.

Conclusion

This paper explored the experience of the convergent actuality of our sense of self as our sense of Being and our sense of Being as our sense of self. This study is done in the context of the anatman experience of Early Buddhism. The paper elaborated the experience of the convergent absence of our sense of self with the absence of our sense of Being. The paper makes phenomenologically explicit the Intertwining of Self and Being. Philosophy can deepen our experience of Being in the World, and Philosophy can deepen our experience of our absence of our Being in World. Human beings are ontic-ontological creatures. Their sense self is intertwined with their sense of Being.

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